

KABLOONA

By GONTRAN DE PONCINS

KABLOONA is the name given to the white man by the Eskimo of the far Arctic region of the mainland and vast islands north of Canada. It is scarcely necessary to specify more closely the scene of this remarkable book, for geography means little or nothing in the Arctic, where man depends upon wind, snow, and ice.

The Kabloona who wrote this book in collaboration with Lewis Galantière, from the log of a year and a quarter in the north and a journey of 20,000 miles, is a French scientist and traveler. He is one of those men who have felt the malaise of modern civilization, and has escaped before this to live among and study primitive people in various parts of the world. He is not just a trained observer noting customs and traits; he is a modern man intensely curious to understand the mind of primitive man—how he thinks, how he lives, what he hopes for, why he endures; to discover, if possible, what springs of human nature we have



left behind us in our course toward a mechanical, war-making civilization. His book might almost be called a study in happiness.

And thus, in spite of its drama of Arctic incident, and its complete story of what is probably the strangest life—from our point of view—in this world today, it differs from any other Arctic book I have ever seen. For de Poncins went north not just to study the Eskimo, but to become intimate with him, to learn to live and think and feel as he did, and to experience, in his heart and soul as well as in his

body, the life of Stone-Age man. He succeeded so far, that when at last he came back into contact with white men who were merely traveling and working in the Arctic, he had nothing to say to them, nothing to ask, no real communication for a while with them. As far as a man of our culture could, he had, for a time, been an Eskimo.

To indicate how far away from civilization he went, let it be noted that to get back to Vancouver from Coppermine, on the Arctic coast to the east of Alaska, was a trip of nearly two months, yet Coppermine was only his point of departure to the further north, where at last he found and stayed with and learned to love a tribe of Eskimo entirely uncontaminated by white civilization, who had never seen a white man, except for the celibate Father Hervey who had dedicated himself for life to being their friend and spiritual guide.

But distances are of no importance in this story which, it should be said, has not one moment of slackening interest and no chapter which is not a commentary on the incredible possibilities of human nature. What de Poncins discovered was, that if you like your life, circumstances are of little importance.

The hardships of Eskimo life are extreme. Forty to fifty degrees below zero is normal for most of the year. There is no fixed home;

indeed the best igloo becomes uninhabitable after a little while, and much of the time the family is on the march after food, or visiting, and must build a new igloo every night.

An igloo, this Frenchman found, after he had learned to like raw fish, accept without squeamishness domestic habits that would upset a well-bred dog, and love his hosts when they were lovable, which was by no means always—an igloo was a place to be fond of. You approach it at night through the storm, seeing the soft glow of the seal oil lamp diffused through the snow walls, enter into a place of mirth and greeting, and sit in comfort through cheerful evenings of talk, while dead and frozen seals propped upright around the walls goggle down at the company.

Hot tea, unceasing hot tea, is the gift of the outside world to the Eskimo. Except for that he is a master of nature by his own inventions. Laboring incredibly, he is not conscious of hardship, has no grievance against life. His women, who have no rights and are lent like any other property, nevertheless make a home in the wastes possible and subtly control the actions of the family. Love is a passion, not a romance. In the spring the whole tribe goes mad with a sexual ecstasy which extends even to the very old.

Eating is ecstasy also. When

there is a kill of seal, an elaborate ritual governs each step, from the prayer of thanks to the proper sharing of the food and to the magnificent gorge of the meat, where four men on their knees cutting and gobbling down the raw meat, will consume fifty pounds. Man keeps his sense of manhood by staying alive in the most difficult climate in the world; he exhibits it by his mastership of his dogs. The unit of life is the family, which includes the dogs. All live in a subtle bond that keeps them together, a moving organism in the wastes, lost if separated. There is an intense individualism—characters as sharp-cut as ice blocks; but it is the family that persists. The only crime is killing in order to get a desired wife. There is no stealing, for whatever they have is in common in an emergency. No one starves unless all starve.

This is the background of *Kabloona*, but it is by no means the book. In the course of the narrative you will meet a series of memorable human beings. They begin with Gibson, the manager of the post from which de Poncins sets off for the uncontaminated island of Pelly Bay. Gibson's life is an

exact routine, and to change one item with another is impossible for him. That is the Eskimo way, too. It is the only possible way of life in the north. Then, each gradually coming into the foreground of the story, are the Eskimos themselves—Ohudlerk, Algunaerk, Idmaugnerk and his mischievous, loving, and really pretty wife. You will find admirable photographs of these striking personalities in the book. And Father Hervey, a stoic saint out of the Middle Ages.

If you follow de Poncins in his gradual discovery that the culture of the Stone Age could be as elaborate and often more satisfying than our own, then the dirt, blood, smell, frightful cold, and strange (to put it mildly) personal habits of these Eskimos become tolerable and, at last, inseparable from their philosophy of living. And indeed, while the hardships seem unendurable, yet he succeeds in making the life of the community at Pelly Bay an idyll in the true sense of that word.

This is surely a unique book, excellently written, rich in perception, and so full of remarkable anecdotes that he who reads will be telling stories from it for a long, long time.

HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

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